

# *“Pūpūkāhi i Holomua”*— Unite in Order to Progress

Helen Wong Smith

Helen Wong Smith served as the seventy-eighth president of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in 2023–2024. Her presidential address was delivered on August 15, 2024, during *ARCHIVES\*RECORDS 2024*, the Annual Meeting of SAA.

Aloha kākou,

When I say it has been an honor to serve as your president, it is not offered as the platitude commonly uttered by an outgoing leader, but from one who had no designs for the position and believed herself ill-prepared to serve in this capacity. My goal to provide space to hear all voices has had mixed results. With your indulgence, observations and how we respond to them are offered here.

Last year I shared the proverb, *A'ohe pau ka 'ike i ka hālau ho'okahi*—all knowledge is not taught in one school—reminding us we can learn from many sources. I invited you to leave your comfort zone and your habitual practices and seek a different point of view or knowledge-base, whether it be in the professional setting or a personal experience. This past year we have experienced many societal changes, and I am firm in adhering to my belief that by seeking opportunities to learn of others' experiences and knowledge, we expand our understanding of issues we lack exposure to and can adapt our actions toward increasing the relevancy and vitality of SAA and our profession.

With this goal in mind, I established a *hui* (an informal group) on Collaboration charged with developing a decision-making protocol for potential collaborations with guidelines and variations as well as the process for approval. Representatives from our Sections on International Archival Affairs and Native American Archives,

the Regional Archival Associations Consortium, and our liaison to the International Council on Archives have been working with Council and staff leadership on these deliverables. Other actions included conversations with the Academy of Certified Archivists to increase collaboration and opportunities to strengthen both organizations. Participating in quarterly meetings with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and other archival associations has established a structure to identify common challenges and how they may be addressed through cooperation.

Collaboration cannot be facilitated without awareness of our profession and SAA, which can be achieved through representation. Opportunities this past year included a public forum with the Archivist of the United States<sup>1</sup> and one with Library 2.0, a network for librarians and educators. These efforts also include SAA staff, as our CEO served as the co-chair of the Executive Committee of the National Coalition for History—always assuring our voice is being heard. I encourage those of you who are members of allied organizations to exercise these opportunities.

Increasing collaboration and awareness are not the only tactics to strengthen SAA and our profession. SAA continues to enhance both, as evidenced by the engagement of our educational offerings. Consider, for example, the 256 attendees to the Records Management Section's Colloquium on email preservation and the extensive professional development offerings we provide, both through our Sections and our Continuing Education programming. The practice of allowing non-members to join up to three Sections, providing free access to a plethora of resources, demonstrates our professional awareness and reflects our dedication to the profession at large. An existential consideration is to balance these offerings with the benefits of joining SAA. Continuous requests for increased opportunities for members and non-members require increased support. We can no longer rely on membership dues, which have not increased since 2019, or on the annual conference, which is exponentially more costly to hold with the hybrid platform and dramatic hotel increases, to meet the demand for increased services and offerings.

We have traditionally relied heavily on volunteers' expertise and labor to fulfill many benefits toward the success of our members and profession. In response to calls to compensate those who serve in different capacities, an Honoraria and Rewards Hui was established and has focused on section funding opportunities.

In addition to demands for increasing services, resources, and opportunities, how we conduct our business has been questioned. Calls for change in SAA and the profession by this year's candidates reflect this approach to remain valued and relevant. Joseph Murphy's recognition that there often exists "dynamic cultural and well-entrenched structural barriers that make the realization of professional community problematic"<sup>2</sup> reflects succinctly that change is a complicated effort. For some, change is to be avoided, as the status quo works for them, and they are not cognizant of the obstacles it presents to others. It has been difficult for some members to accept changes despite our efforts to be transparent and inclusive

while considering divergent viewpoints when decision-making. For others, radical change is the preferred approach to address the existing issues facing an organization or profession. As with any society, the pendulum swings when those traditionally marginalized become comfortable disparaging those they perceive as their oppressors with the same level of stereotyping and intolerance they received. I favor the Buddhist approach of the Middle Way; a balanced approach that avoids extremes and reconciles duality to address the shortcomings of the status quo while avoiding unnecessary and painful casualties of radical change.

The call to seek alternative perspectives even when you perceive yourself to be fully informed is strongly advocated. Priya Parker's challenge to "Listen deeply enough to be changed by what you hear"<sup>3</sup> supports this activity, the first step in practicing cultural competence which can dramatically impact how we facilitate change. We should also consider how our words and actions impact others, as to disregard this aspect can alienate previous and possible allies. We also need to graciously accept that we will not get all our desires all of the time, and that as members of a community there are many strategies to reach common goals.

To all, I invite you to adopt our changes through an inquiry-based mindset which requires the acceptance of risk-taking and allowing time to engage in iterative processes. It is a process which may not satisfy the expediency some desire, but I believe it is the prudent one for the long game. This is one of the many reasons I am thrilled Tomaro Taylor is your new president<sup>4</sup> who shares many philosophical tenets and will undoubtedly achieve these goals much more ably than I could. It is due to her wisdom and support that I am able to stand here today with my mental health relatively intact. My thanks to the Executive Committee who provided valued guidance in facing multiple challenges. To a very hard-working Council, I am grateful such astute minds are dedicated to our profession. My heartfelt mahalo to the SAA staff for their gracious indulgence reminding me of protocols and dealing with my often-confused frame of mind. I owe them all several drinks. I end with the final call: *Pūpūkūhi i holomua*. Unite in order to progress. Mahalo nūnui.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Former Archivist of the United States Dr. Colleen Shogan was removed from the position on February 7, 2025. SAA's response to the dismissal urges advocacy. See <https://www2.archivists.org/news/2025/saa-response-to-aotus-removal-urges-advocacy#:~:text=Continuing%20Education%E2%96%BA,SAA%20Response%20to%20AOTUS%20Removal%20Urges%20Advocacy,our%20nation%20and%20its%20people>, captured at <https://perma.cc/NH8V-DMQK>.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Murphy, "Creating Communities of Professionalism: Addressing Cultural and Structural Barriers," *Journal of Educational Administration*, v53, no. 2, 2015, 154–76.

<sup>3</sup> Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*, Riverhead Books, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Tomaro Taylor stepped down as SAA President in February 2025. She was succeeded by President-Elect Derek Mosley. See <https://www2.archivists.org/news/2025/derek-mosley-assumes-saa-presidency-mario-ramirez-to-be-vice-president>, captured at <https://perma.cc/ZSW9-RVHL>.